

# **River Road Press Conference**

## **May 14, 2020**

### **Introduction**

I am Interim Police Chief Donny Williams and today we want to give a brief summary of the crash and missing persons investigations surrounding the death of 27-year-old Stephanie Mayorga and 25-year-old Paige Escalera.

Again, our deepest sympathies to the families involved in this tragedy. Our hope is that the results of our investigations will give some closure and understanding. We realize that the information we release today will not erase this devastating ordeal, but our hope is that it will give everyone a sense of what was happening the night of the crash as well as during our missing persons investigation.

We are aware of the tremendous interest in this case and believe that we should share as much information as possible. However, there is some information that is sensitive in nature and we will not disclose it out of respect for the families, and of course there is some information that is protected by law.

Today, I have with me Deputy Police Chief Alex Sotelo, who will summarize the missing persons investigation as well as the traffic crash investigation. Deputy Police Chief Ben Kennedy will give an overview of the night of the crash and our response to the 911 call made on April 15.

Throughout this presentation we will show photos from the crash site as well as a photo-enhanced re-enactment of the crash.

We want to thank everyone who helped with these investigations, as well as our partnering agencies: The Wilmington Fire Department and New Hanover Regional EMS.

### **Missing Persons and Traffic Investigation**

On April 19, Wilmington Police were called to 376 S. Kerr Avenue in reference to two missing women. The women's roommate stated they were last seen on the night of April 15, and that she was under the impression you could not report missing persons until 72 hours had elapsed. A missing persons report was filed, and investigators got to work.

A search of the apartment revealed the women had left all of their property in the home, including Paige's cell phone. They had also ordered food, which was discovered outside their door the following morning. All signs seemed to indicate the couple intended to return home that night.

Over the course of the next two weeks, the Wilmington Police Department's Criminal Investigation Division worked diligently to find the missing couple. Police reached out and received assistance from numerous area law enforcement agencies, and SABLE (helicopter) and

Marine 1 (boat) were utilized to search broad areas of interest in an effort to find the women's missing Dodge Dart. These searches were focused in the area of their Kerr Avenue apartment.

Detectives interviewed family members, friends, co-workers, and past relations, which involved more than 1,600 man hours, numerous phone and in-person interviews, and more than 100 tips from across the United States and internationally. They extensively searched both women's social media pages and phone records, as well as Paige's abandoned cell phone, for any clues that could lead to their whereabouts. At the same time, the department received false leads, including a text from someone demanding money and claiming they had kidnapped the couple.

On May 4, police discovered a 911 call from the night of April 15 in which the caller stated he witnessed a car traveling at a high rate of speed, running through a stop sign, and crashing near the intersection of River Road and Independence — nearly 6.5 miles from the women's apartment.

When police arrived on scene around 3 p.m. that afternoon, there were no obvious signs of a wreck. There were no broken limbs, no skid marks, and no debris. The only evidence of the crash was a faint tire imprint near the curb, as well as scuffmarks on the curb itself.

The Dodge Dart was hidden in an area of thick vegetation, partially submerged in a swamp with only a small section of the roof visible from up above. Officers had to use a machete to cut a path to the vehicle. In addition, a tow truck was called to remove it, which created the tire tracks, broken limbs, and other obvious disturbances visible in photos taken at the scene after May 4.

Once the car was in the open, two bodies were visible inside — both significantly decomposed. They were taken for an autopsy, and police immediately began a traffic investigation. Now that the investigation has been completed, we can confidently say alcohol and speed were major factors in the wreck.

We believe the women were traveling west on Independence Boulevard, between 102 and 103mph, when they hit the curb to the left of the Watermark Marina entrance and went airborne.

The ground slopes down in that area, which put the Dodge Dart 20 feet above ground level as it continued forward between the trees, traveling between 97 and 101mph. It then hit the ground 115 feet away from the road and skidded forward until it collided with a tree 150 feet off the roadway.

This crash happened in the blink of an eye. From the time the vehicle hit the curb to the time of the collision, only 0.99 seconds elapsed.

Data from the car's computer shows the driver hit the brake at the same moment the vehicle struck the curb, which explains the lack of skid marks. The car battery broke in half on impact, shutting off any lights or sounds that could have alerted first responders to the crash. In addition, thick vegetation at the back of the car fully covered the taillights and prevented any reflection under a searchlight.

Several open, empty beer bottles were discovered in the vehicle, and investigators were able to determine the women purchased a 12 pack of beer from a convenience store at 10:49 p.m., roughly one hour prior to the crash. Surveillance photos also show one of the women holding a beer bottle as they exited their apartment around 9 p.m. that night.

Due to the level of decomposition, it is unlikely that a toxicology report will yield results, but based on this evidence, we are confident alcohol played a large role in the crash.

Using dental records and visible tattoos, the medical examiner has identified Stephanie Mayorga as the driver and Paige Escalera as the passenger. The cause of death for both women has been ruled the result of traumatic head and chest injuries sustained in the crash.

## **911 Call**

On April 15, at approximately 11:54 p.m., a call came into the 911 Center from a caller who was driving east down Independence Boulevard away from River Road.

He told dispatchers he saw a car pass him going at a high rate of speed and run a stop sign. He then looked in the passenger's side rearview mirror and saw the car hitting a wall and crashing into a wooded area. The caller told dispatch that he was not from the area and was unsure where he was.

At that same time, officers were in the area responding to an armed robbery and were looking for the suspect when they noticed the call for the crash was pending and dispatched themselves to the call. They arrived on scene along with the Wilmington Fire Department and New Hanover Regional Medical Center EMS. The caller remained on the scene and spoke with emergency responders about what he saw. When they begin to inspect the area for damage they found no skid marks, the wall had not been damaged and there was no damage to the trees or brush in the area.

Fire personnel used the lights on the fire truck to illuminate the area. Officers were directed to expand their search and drive down opposite ends of River Road. There were a total of nine emergency responders at the scene as well as the caller who aided in the search.

During this time, a second armed robbery call went out over the radio and then a shots fired call was dispatched minutes later, which turned into a homicide. The officers on scene left the area to respond to those calls.

EMS and Fire left the scene a few minutes later. Emergency personnel spent a total of about 8 minutes on the scene before they left. In that time, no lights were seen and there was no smoke or noise coming from the crash site.